

HISTORICAL ADDRESS DELIVERED AUGUST 7, 1889 AT THE  
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION WAITSFIELD, VERMONT

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# HISTORICAL ADDRESS

*DELIVERED AUGUST 7, 1889,*

AT THE

## CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

COMMEMORATING THE FIRST SETTLEMENT  
OF THE TOWN OF

WAITSFIELD, VERMONT,

BY

GENERAL BENJAMIN WAIT.

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BY

DR. W. A. JONES.

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1892

Caledonian Press--C. M. Stone & Company  
ST. JOHNSBURY, VERMONT.

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Jones, Walter A.

Historical address delivered August 7, 1889, at the centennial celebration commemorating the first settlement of the town of Waitsfield, Vermont, by General Benjamin Wait. St. Johnsbury, Vt., 1892.

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# THEORY



## HISTORICAL ADDRESS.

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Before the close of the French and English war in America, which resulted in the cession of Canada to the English in 1763, the territory of what is now called Vermont had remained very nearly in the condition of an unbroken and desolate wilderness.

A very few settlements had been begun near the Massachusetts line, and along the eastern border of Lake Champlain. They were, however, more like military posts than like actual permanent settlements.

The territory lying between the Connecticut river on the east, and the lake on the west, was dangerous and unattractive ground, liable if improved by settlers to suffer from frequent invasions by the French troops stationed in Canada, as well as by their Indian allies. It was, then, chiefly a "hunting ground and lurking place" for Indians, who were unwilling to make of it for themselves even a very permanent home, because its forests were too near unfriendly tribes occupying adjacent territory.

The submission of Canada to the English in 1763, and the outward movement of neighboring Indians,



prepared the way for adventurous settlers and for land speculators, and during the following three or four years townships were granted, covering more than one-half of the territory of the state.

Then there began, in earnest, a drifting of inhabitants from the country lying south and southeast towards the wilderness of the New Hampshire grants, and then there followed another peculiar experience of hard toil, of frugality and heroism, illustrated by the early settlers of this land of the "Green Mountain Boys."

On this tide of immigration there came to Windsor in 1767 (third in the order of early settlers of that township) the family of Benjamin Wait. It may have been the first shift made by this man and wife, in securing for themselves a permanent home; for though the husband was then thirty-one years of age, he had already been in military service six years, and his wife, Lois Gilbert Wait, was only eighteen.

They continued to live in Windsor twenty-two years, and there, it is supposed, their children were born, consisting of six sons and two daughters. In 1789 Gen. Wait removed to the township of Waitsfield, named in honor of him, and with his family began a settlement, which was at the same time the first settlement of the town and of the valley of Mad river.

Fifteen years after this event Mrs. Lois Wait died and was buried on the little mound in the meadow, within a few feet or rods of the exact site of their first dwelling-house, where eighteen years later (in 1822) the remains of Gen. Wait were also deposited.

This brief outline barely touches, at distant points, the career of the subject of our sketch.

Some years ago the following brief tribute was pub-





lished by an able editor of early Vermont history, Hon. E. P. Walton, who said of him: "Though not ranked among the few persons recognized as leaders of the people, and founders of the state, he has left a record, which is very remarkable for the many military and civil services recorded and the graces that prove and adorn a Christian character."

Let the following review also bear evidence that those words convey no extravagant eulogy by a writer who had seen some of the veritable traces of that life in the early records of our little commonwealth.

Benjamin Wait was born at Sudbury, Mass., ( a small town about twenty miles west from Boston) Feb. 13, 1736. He was connected with a respectable ancestry, that had then inhabited Boston and portions of eastern Massachusetts and Connecticut during a period of more than a hundred years, and among whom were many men of more than ordinary character.

The record of his active life begins in 1755, when at the age of eighteen or nineteen years he entered military service at the call of Gen. Shirley, then the colonial Governor of Massachusetts, and under his command.

This was at the beginning of the war (to which allusion has already been made) that opened the territory of Vermont to settlement.

There were fitted out that year four important and leading expeditions, directed against French forts on the northern and northwestern frontier of the English American colonies, and situated respectively in Nova Scotia, at Crown Point on Lake Champlain, at Fort Niagara, and at Fort DuQuesne on the present site of Pittsburg, Pa. In the allotment of service to the several commands, Gen. Shirley and his Massachusetts men





were expected to make their way westward, and, if possible, secure possession of Fort Niagara. This they failed to do. Many of our school children, even, can readily recall the story of the crushing defeat of Gen. Braddock at Fort DuQuesne, as described in their common school histories; but the thought may be a new one that this event had a near bearing on the course of the young soldier, Benjamin Wait.

That defeat appears to have turned Shirley's force aside in its course; for on account of its situation an attack on Fort Niagara was thus made extremely hazardous.

Halting at Oswego, on the shore of Lake Ontario, the little army constructed winter quarters, and awaited the next season's campaign.

That was a perilous decision. Early in the spring of 1756 a little fleet, under the French general, Montcalm, swept along the river St. Lawrence and over the lake, demolished the forts and captured fourteen hundred men.

The old story of the capture of our young soldier, Wait, is that "he was taken to Quebec, then to France, where he was re-taken by the English and carried to England, and in the following year returned to America."

Meantime failure and defeat had been a very common experience of the English troops in this war with France on American territory.

In 1758, Gen. Amherst, the British commander-in-chief, came to America. Gathering a large force of regular and provincial troops at Boston, with whom young Wait re-enlisted, he sailed at once for the French fort at Louisburg, on the island of Cape Briton, near the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It was considered to be the strongest fortress in America. In less than two months the fort



was taken. General Amherst with a part of his army returned to Boston, and from that place pushed his way through the forests to Albany, N. Y.

The next spring he engaged in the successful campaign of getting possession of Crown Point and Ticonderoga. This expedition also resulted in expelling the little squads of French and Indians that infested the northern shores of Lake Champlain and the upper banks of the Connecticut river.

There are sufficient reasons for believing that the course of these expeditions, thus far, indicates correctly the course of the subject of our sketch.

The campaigns of 1760, including the operations of other commands, closed that war.

The body of troops to which Wait was attached had then advanced as far west as Fort Pontchartrain in Detroit. From this place he was sent, with others under his command, to bring in the French garrisons stationed in Illinois, which included one at Fort Chicago, built on the present site of the great Western city which bears its name. This required a tedious journey of from three to four months, which ended successfully in March, 1761.

The climax of this early experience of war and imprisonment was illustrated long ago in the following statement: "At twenty-five years of age he had been engaged in forty battles and skirmishes and had his clothing perforated many times with musket balls, but received no wound."

Six years afterwards this man of soldierly bearing, tall, erect, muscular and vigorous, laid the foundations of his forest home in Windsor. If he then had anticipations of living a quiet, retired life, they were very im-



perfectly realized. It was barely two years before he was called to act as a civil officer or deputy sheriff in arresting certain lawless depredations committed at distant points.

Very soon the famous controversy with New York arose concerning jurisdiction and land titles in Vermont, in which he identified himself with the "Green Mountain Boys" in resisting the unjust claims of the New York authorities.

A few weeks after, the battles of Lexington and Concord were fought, in 1775. A convention of Cumberland county (then embracing what are now Windsor and Windham counties) was called at Westminster to see what response its inhabitants would make to the provincial congress at New York concerning the oppressive acts of Great Britain toward her American colonies. At that convention Benjamin Wait was the only delegate from Windsor. There was then no state organization; no representation in the Continental congress. They had merely the crudest form of civil government within the county. There was, however, a genuine and hearty patriotic ring in the resolutions that expressed the sense of that body of early settlers on that occasion. They resolved unanimously "that we will resist and oppose the said acts of parliament in conjunction with our brethren in America, at the expense of our lives and fortunes to the last extremity, if our duty to God and our country requires the same."

Three days later, William Williams, Benjamin Wait and Joab Hoisington, citizens of that county, in a letter addressed to the president of the New York provincial congress, tendered their services as colonel,





lieut.-colonel and major ("in the order of their names") of a regiment to be raised in Cumberland county. They were duly commissioned for those positions, though not for the proposed regiment.

The next year, 1776, (memorable date) four companies of militia, bearing the suggestive name of "Rangers," were organized on the east side of the Green Mountains.

Mr. Wait was chosen and commissioned first captain in this department. No service outside the state was then contemplated, and we know of no immediate call upon them for service, unless for the purpose of an occasional drill.

In the summer of 1777 the Americans were alarmed at the rapid and victorious advance of the British General Burgoyne from Canada, southward over Lake Champlain to the forts near Ticonderoga, thence moving onward towards New York, along the western border of Vermont. This called Vermonters, on the west side of the mountains, to arms at short notice.

We do not know that the rangers of Cumberland county were present at the battle of Bennington, August 1-6. It is certain, however, that (through the agency of the distinguished Ira Allen, brother of Gen. Ethan Allen) Captain Benjamin Wait was commissioned about three weeks afterwards by the Vermont Council of Safety, as major of Col. Samuel Herrick's regiment of rangers, which did gallant service at that battle; also that a few days later he was on the way with the regiment to regain the forts at the northern extremity of Lake George, and near Ticonderoga. The result of this expedition may be discerned in the following congratulatory order of Gen. George Washington, dated "Head-

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quarters, Camp at Pennybackus Mills, Sept. 28th, 1777.

"The Commander-in-Chief has the happiness again to congratulate the troops on the success of the Americans to the northward."

(Then follows a reference to the then recent victory of Gen. Gates over Gen. Burgoyne at Stillwater.)

"The Commander-in-Chief has further occasion to congratulate the troops on the success of a detachment of the northern army, who attacked and carried several of the enemy's posts, and got possession of several of the old French lines at Ticonderoga. To celebrate this success the general orders that, at four o'clock this afternoon, all the troops be paraded and served a gill of rum per man, and, at the same time, there be discharges of thirteen pieces of artillery from the park. \* \* \*

(Signed) GEO. WASHINGTON."

In November of the same year information was received that the enemy were in possession of Mount Independence on the easterly shore of the lake (in the northwestern corner of Orwell, Addison county) and also of Mount Defiance on the opposite shore. Major Wait and Captain Ebenezer Allen were sent with detachments of their regiment to dispossess them of these defences.

The following letter of Gov. Thomas Chittenden to Major-General Gates of Washington's army, states the result of that "ranging" movement:

"BENNINGTON, 22 Nov., 1777.

"We have the pleasure to inform your honor of the success of our Green Mountain Rangers in harrassing the enemy's rear on their retreat from Ticonderoga, in which Captain Ebenezer Allen with fifty rangers has taken forty-nine prisoners, upwards of one hundred horses,



twelve yoke of oxen, four cows and three of the enemy's boats, etc.

"Major Wait, who was sent to take possession of Mount Independence, found nothing of consequence there except several boats, which the enemy had sunk, in which there were some provisions. All barracks, houses and bridges were burnt. Cannon to the number of forty were broken or spiked up. He was so fortunate as to take one French sutler, with some rum, wine, brandy, etc."

To which we add, if such a condition of things does not describe an important capture, it nevertheless suggests a total rout of all but the old sutler, who bravely stood by his guns, which were slower, possibly, in killing than even an old flint-lock musket of those days, but were about as sure.

Col. Herrick, commander of the regiment, promptly reported this victory to the Vermont Council of Safety, which replied through its secretary, Joseph Fay, as follows:

"DEAR SIR:— \* \* \* I am directed by council to let you know they are much pleased at the spirited conduct of Major Wait and Captain Allen in their late expedition, by your orders, and that a copy of your letter will be immediately sent to the Honorable Major-Gen. Gates, which I think cannot fail to recommend your regiment in the highest degree."

In those days the terms of enlistment in Vermont were very short, and in the following January the subject of our sketch appears to have returned to his family.

In Feb., 1778, he is found to have been employed in raising several companies on the east side of the mountain for Col. Herrick's regiment, with which he was re-



quested to go as major, in an intended expedition into Canada, with continental troops under Gen. Lafayette. Copies of letters written to him upon this subject have been preserved among the early records of state affairs. This intended expedition at length failed to go into effect, but the enlisted men were wanted by the Council of Safety, to defend the frontiers, and therefore they directed Major Wait to "inquire whether those engaged were willing to take a short tour for that purpose."

At about that time, 1778, Vermont formally organized as an independent state. This opened the way to a wider field for public service, and in 1779 Mr. Wait was chosen town representative from Windsor to the general assembly, then a body of rather more than sixty members, and without any stated place of holding all its meetings. He was re-elected in 1782 and again in 1785, serving as chairman and otherwise on several important special committees.

At the session of 1779 he was chosen sheriff of Cumberland county, then a very responsible position, as will hereinafter appear. This position he held two years; then relinquished it for a year in consequence of being called again to engage in military service. In 1782, he was again elected sheriff, but for the new county of Windsor, a division of the old county having been made. He continued to hold this position by successive re-elections until the autumn of 1787, when other plans rendered it expedient for him to decline a re-election.

At the session of 1779 a special Board of War was created, having reference to the supervision of military affairs within the state. It consisted of nine men, chosen by the legislature, by ballot, from a list of eight-





een names, proposed by a committee appointed for the purpose.

This Board of War was continued four years by annual elections, and until after the termination of the Revolutionary war. Major Wait was a member of this board continuously, except for the year 1781-2, when he was re-engaged in active military service.

It was the duty of this Board of War to examine into the necessity of the defence of the frontiers of the state; to decide where the frontier lines of defence should be drawn; to recommend raising troops when deemed advisable; to appoint their officers; to call out the militia and to attend to the wants of the commissary department, if not otherwise provided for, etc. The following incidents will illustrate:

On the 9th day of August, 1780, a party of Indians, (British allies) twenty-one in number, entered the town of Barnard, Windsor county, where they seized three men and carried them into captivity.

The Board of War were called to meet at Arlington, Bennington county, on the 21st of the same month. Whereupon they directed that forts should at once be built in the vicinity of Bethel. They appointed a committee, including Major Wait, to have charge of the work; directing him to provide the necessary implements for building the forts, also all necessary camp equipage; then designated two companies of the militia to occupy the forts and guard the frontier. At the same time they stipulated that the forts should be erected in the cheapest manner, having reference to that campaign only; for, as they explained, "the lands that the several surveyors are surveying to the west and north will be settling the next spring, which will make it necessary





that a line of forts should be erected further back." Major Wait rode from Windsor to Arlington, a distance of seventy-six miles, on horseback to attend this meeting. When the board made up their bill of debentures this was his share in the charges:

Major Benjamin Wait, 2 days,	24£	
Travel, 76 miles,	60£	16s.
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Total,	84£	16s.

Nominally this would be about \$413 in denominations of U. S. money now in use, for a trip requiring possibly a week's time, and including the use of his horse, and some other travelling expenses. Pleased be assured that he was, after all, no robber of the state treasury.

In payment he must take the continental currency then in circulation, which had rapidly depreciated in value, until \$30 in it represented the equivalent of only \$1 in good silver money. That enormous sum, then, reduced to a silver basis, was only \$13.76.

In the winter of 1781 preparations were hastily made for an expected enemy on the frontier lines, established across the state from Bethel on the east to Pittsford and Castleton on the west. The governor was requested, by the general assembly, to call Major Wait on the east and Col. Fletcher on the west into active service at the frontiers.

The Board of War made a requisition for six tons of lead and 18,000 good gun flints; two-thirds to be delivered at Bennington, and the balance to be forwarded to Major Benjamin Wait at Windsor. The commissary of purchases was requested to "furnish Major Wait's detachment with 50 pairs of snow shoes without loss of time," also "snow shoes to Lieut. Beriah Green's



party of fifteen scouts, who with ten days' provisions were directed to proceed by way of Onion river to the lake, for the purpose of discovering the enemy and to make return of his discovery to Major Wait."

The authorized equipment of a non-commissioned officer and private in this campaign, exclusive of his clothing and blanket, was to consist of "1 good musquet, 1 good bayonet or tomahawk, 1 knapsack, 1 powder flask or horn; 1 bullet pouch and sufficient tump line or sling for packs, (this being a strap across the forehead to assist a man in carrying a pack on his back)." This campaign was after all a very quiet affair, but the troops were evidently kept on the frontier through the entire summer and autumn.

The next general assembly appears to have complimented our Major with a colonel's commission.

In the autumn of 1783 he was selected to take command of a well equipped force of a hundred men designed to suppress a formidable insurrection in Windham county, but a timely submission of the insurrectionists prevented the march of the troops which were in readiness.

In the autumn of 1786 there was an attempted insurrection in Windsor county, similar in character to the famous Shay's rebellion, which occurred in Massachusetts the same year. A Windsor paper of that date thus described it: "On the 5th of November, 1786, being the day assigned by law for the sitting of the court of common pleas for that county, in that town, a mob of about thirty men, under arms, assembled, supposed with the design to stop the court. Sheriff Benjamin Wait and State's Attorney Jacobs waited on them, ordered them to disperse, and read the riot act, etc.



The insurgents, finding their views baffled, dispersed, and the court proceeded to business without molestation.

"A leader of the party was soon after taken for riot. He pleaded guilty and threw himself on the mercy of the court, who sentenced him to suffer one month's imprisonment, procure bonds of one-hundred pounds for his good behavior for two years, pay a fine of ten pounds and cost of suit. The mob, hearing of the matter, sent to their friends and assembled at the house of Captain Lull in Hartland, to the number of thirty or forty, under arms, intending to rescue. The court, being informed of this, ordered Sheriff Wait to collect assistance, proceed to the place and conduct the insurgents to prison, which, after a short scuffle with bayonets, the breeches of guns, clubs, etc., was happily effected without loss of life. Twenty-seven of the insurgents were taken and brought to gaol, most of whom pleaded guilty and were sentenced to pay fines, costs of court and procure bonds for their good behavior for one year.

"On hearing of other hostile movements the militia were called for and turned out in such numbers that the insurgents did not think proper to make their appearance. In this affair both Wait and Jacobs were wounded; the former being confined twenty-six days by his wound, which was in his head."

Col. Wait was elected brigadier-general of the 3d Brigade of Vermont militia March 1, 1787, by the general assembly then in session at Rutland.

The following year, being actively engaged in preparations for beginning the settlement of Waitsfield, and supposing his military career to be an end, he tendered his resignation in a letter addressed to the governor





and council then in session at Rutland. Its reception was acknowledged by that body, August 24, 1788, and the following entry was made in the minutes of the council: "A letter received from General Wait, resigning his office as brigadier-general, being read, the secretary was directed to inform the General that they are unwilling to discharge him without further consideration and request his continuance in service."

Subsequently his military services were further complimented by the General Assembly in his election to the position of major-general of militia, this being the highest military title that could be conferred.

The preparation of this man to retire into the wilderness of Waitsfield to make another home, at the age of fifty-three years, and with such an experience in life, appears to have been a movement to settle a large and rapidly maturing family, under what he supposed were favorable circumstances for the times in which he lived.

His oldest son, Ezra, had nearly, if not quite, reached the age of managing his own concerns, and the other sons, Benjamin, Jr., Gilbert, Thomas, Joseph and John, ranged from the age of the young man to that of the small boy.

There were two daughters, Sarah and Lois, who were married (eight to ten years afterwards) respectively to Aaron Phelps, son of an early settler of Waitsfield, and Lynde Wait, who was the first settler in our neighboring town of Fayston.

General Wait had, at one time, an interest in other town grants. The townships of Isle la Motte and the Two Heroes of Grand Isle county were, in 1770, granted to General Ethan Allen, Col. Samuel Herrick, Col. Benjamin Wait and about ninety associates. What the





General did with his rights in those fertile townships cannot now be explained. Their situation may have been unattractive to him, being a man more accustomed to the use of snow shoes than to the use of boat and oars, and the idea of connecting islands with each other and with mainland by bridges built with the aid of state appropriations was then too remote to be practicable. The grant of the township of Waitsfield was made by the governor and council at Bennington Feb. 25, 1782, with the following special stipulations: "Resolved, That the proprietors of the township of Waitsfield granted to Gen. Roger Enos, Col. Benjamin Wait and Company to the number of sixty-five, pay for each right eight pounds, lawful money in silver, to be paid by the first day of May next. To be settled in three years after the war will admit with safety."

The charter of the town, (which is still a well preserved document, and is among the treasures carried in the little red trunk passed regularly from one board of selectmen to the next) bears a corresponding date, but includes the names of seventy grantees, besides five public rights for the benefit of a college, grammar school, town schools, support of the ministry and for the first settled minister. It confirms, then, seventy-five proprietary rights, each entitled to about 318 acres of land.

The charter defines a settlement of these individual rights to mean that each proprietor should cause to be cultivated and planted five acres of land belonging to his right; to build thereon a house at least eighteen feet square on the floor, and have one family on each respective right within the aforesaid three years. (If these conditions were not complied with the land should revert to the state.)



Such a requirement appears to us quite impracticable, standing, as we do, in full view of so many mountainous sub-divisions of the town.

It was found in those days to be impracticable, but partly because of the stagnation and financial distress that so generally prevailed in the years next following the Revolutionary war; and a few years later that condition was modified in the interest of the landholder.

Gen. Roger Enos, whose name heads the list on the charter of Waitsfield, was, at the time, at the head of the military department in Vermont and resided in Hartland, Windsor county. Enosburgh, in Franklin county, derived its name from him—he being an original proprietor of that town. Many other grantees of this town were residents of Windsor county, others of Cheshire county, N. H., lying on the other side of the Connecticut river, and others still were doubtless residents of the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

It had been the policy of the leading men of Vermont for various reasons to secure among the grantees of the new townships a liberal number of citizens of adjoining states.

Gen. Wait and his two sons, Ezra and Gilbert, (who were minors and quite young when their father caused their names to be inserted in the charter) were the only persons of the seventy original proprietors who ever came to Waitsfield to reside. A few others furnished settlers in the persons of their sons; one, a resident of Claremont, N. H., sending three sons as soon as they respectively became of age.

The force of state surveyors did not reach the work of running out and establishing the boundary lines of Waitsfield until 1787.



This was the signal of action to Gen. Wait and other leading proprietors of the new townships. Several business meetings of those original landholders were held in Windsor and Hartland in the summer and fall of 1788.

A survey of the town was ordered and made; a plan was drawn, dividing it into 150 lots of 150 acres each (as it was at first supposed), leaving a narrow strip of land on the east side of the town, and several small gores of land along the diagonal south line to be surveyed and divided several years later.

These lots were numbered from 1 to 150; and the drawing of lots by the proprietors then followed. Slips of paper containing all the numbers were then placed in a box; the names on the charter called over separately; one number drawn to each name, and then again in like manner.

Let us see how General Wait and his two sons fared in that drawing.

The father drew a lot lying at the Warren line, east of the point where the highway now enters the town from East Warren. Ezra drew the adjoining lot in the same range, lying northeast of it. Gilbert drew a lot now well up in the pastures and woodlands southwest of "Palmer Hill." The father also drew lot 56, located on the northern slope of the mountain sometimes designated as "Old Scrag," and extending well over the summit. Ezra further drew the lot on which Mr. Nathan Boyce now lives. Gilbert's other lot was on the river and is now occupied by the southerly section of our village, and a portion of the "Parker farm."

A committee of three to look out the direction of the first roads in Waitsfield was also chosen. It was ac-







accompanied by Gen. Wait, who assisted in the work, and was also paid for his services. This was the report they carried back to the land owners, to which a few words of explanation are added.

"We have looked three ways that we were directed and found the way through Warren Hollow (East Warren) will accommodate the *settle* of the town best.

"We find there may be a road to Northfield that will accommodate the settlement of the east part of the town." (About one-third of the township being originally on the east side of the mountain range.)

"The road through Warren," they said, "will strike Waitsfield south line near the 5th range from Fayston," (or near where the road now enters from East Warren,) "thence keeping on that line through said town to the north line," (just westerly from the base of the Bald Mountain,) "and turning down to the river."

"We find there will be another wanting to leave the above road on lot No. 90 or 88," (which would be in the vicinity of the south school-house,) "and turn down to the river to strike what is called the 'Great Eddy,'" (where the old arch bridge now is,) "thence down the river to Moretown line."

The important preliminaries were then completed by voting to petition the general assembly to lay a tax on the lands of the town raising a sum equal to about \$550; one-half to be expended in cutting out roads, building bridges, and the balance to be used as an encouragement to those willing to undertake the building of a grist and saw mill. Gen. Wait was first upon the committee to superintend the expenditure of money in behalf of the proprietors and settlers.

A belief appears to be current that the first settlers of



our town, as well as of other towns in the hilly districts of the state, chose for various reasons the elevated lands for farming purposes in preference to those upon the streams. The history of the settlement of Waitsfield does not sufficiently warrant such a belief.

Very soon after the result of drawing lots was determined, Gen. Wait purchased of the original proprietors owning the same four lots of land in one body lying upon each side of the river bounded southerly, in part, by the Gilbert Wait lot, and northerly by the town school lot. This gave the family a connected tract of seven hundred and fifty acres, now occupied by and surrounding our little village.

It was near the center of this tract that Gen. Wait, and his men and boys, rolled up in the spring or summer of 1789 the first building ever constructed in Mad River Valley, ten or twelve miles away from any other settlement. Its exact site is now a little in doubt. Some suppose it to have stood on the elevation at the little cemetery east of the school-house. Others have located it a little west of that place. As there are indications that the river then passed very near to this site, on the south and east, it is not improbable that the higher ground or hillock may have been chosen as a spot to build upon. A few years later the old log house was vacated by the removal of the family to a larger and pleasanter home, built on the natural terrace north of us and now in the pasture of Mr. L. R. Joslyn. The spot is still readily traced by the lines of former roads running past it, as well as by the half filled cellar and the well about four rods from the northwest corner; also by the relics of the orchard standing a little above it.



An inspection of that spot, and a little survey of the prospect in front and southward, as well as to the east and west, will vindicate the good judgment of that old settler in selecting that site for his home in his declining years, and around which his children and grandchildren clustered until they died or the spirit of emigration drove them elsewhere.

It is not easy now to glean the history of the town from the date of its settlement to the date of its organization in 1794. Clearings in the forests had been made, necessary roads cut out; bridges of an inexpensive style had been constructed at the "Great Eddy," and across the river in the northerly part of the town. A saw mill and a grist mill were built by John Heaton, Jr., on the site long afterward known as "Green's mills," where the saw mill of Mr. M. L. Richardson now stands.

It must have been a day of happy rejoicings among the General's younger boys when the stones of the new grist mill began turning; for tradition has preserved the story that, prior to that event, they had furnished power to crush the corn in a hollowed stump, with a heavy pestle hung to a spring pole.

It is scarcely possible now to trace more than three or four families, besides that of General Wait, to Waitsfield prior to the year 1791. This may even exceed the actual number.

The admission of Vermont into the Union that year, and the consequent settlement of all the long and bitter controversies concerning the validity of land titles, may have done more than we absolutely know to establish confidence and to encourage others (citizens of other states) to move hither in rapidly increasing numbers. At any rate, within the space of a very few







years, we think eighteen or twenty families had moved here from Shelburne, Mass., and its vicinity, of whom probably three-fourths or four-fifths located upon the river lands.

Several families came at about the same time from Windsor; a few each from Cornish and Claremont, N. H., (places near by Windsor); and then, a little later, other towns in Windsor county and in New Hampshire, also some in the states of Connecticut and New York contributed liberally to the permanent population of the towns.

The principal lines of settlement of the early comers can be briefly indicated. They took lands very quickly along the river, occupying every available lot, and in some cases dividing original lots with their friends and old neighbors.

Very early also lands were taken upon one tier, and in some instances upon a second tier, of lots extending from the river near the Great Bridge, (as it was called) easterly to and including "Palmer Hill," where it was supposed by some that the best timbered and richest lands of the town were located. Furthermore, a road from that point had then been, or was soon after, cut out over the mountain to East Waitsfield (which had for many years no population or an exceedingly small one), and thence to Northfield.

Three or four families among the earliest settlers had, however, occupied lands both to the northeast and to the southwest of this line of settlers.

There were enough people here in 1794 so that it was deemed expedient to organize the town.

Gen. Wait, being a Justice of the Peace by appointment of the Legislature, called the first meeting. It



was held at his house and he was the moderator, a position to which he was called with exceeding frequency in after years. He was chosen first selectman, and to some minor offices. This was also a frequent occurrence in later years. In 1795 he was sent as delegate, to establish a court house in the county of Chittenden, this town then being within the limits of that county, and the same year he was chosen as Waitsfield's first representative to the General Assembly of Vermont. In this position he had service for seven nearly successive terms (or ten in all, including the Windsor representation.) The old journals of these sessions contain frequent references to his name, in connection with the formation of committees for special business, and, often more than otherwise, his name headed the list as chairman.

The ten or twelve years next following the organization of the town were years of intense interest and activity in providing for the common needs of the new corporation, including privileges of an educational and religious character.

Numerous public highways, to accommodate the several settled districts of the town, were surveyed and laid out four rods wide, (in singular contrast to the contracted roadways of modern times.)

In 1796 land was secured on the "Common" (as it was afterwards termed) for a public burial yard; for a meeting house and town house, and for grounds to accommodate military trainings, etc. It was at that time uncleared, but was understood to represent the geographical center of the town as well as it could be represented, and the natural attractiveness of the location may have come to be recognized. The same year the first church organization was effected; and the fol-



lowing year that part of the town lying west of the mountain was divided into four school districts which were in 1798 fully organized, but some of them, at least for a time, were obliged to depend on accommodations in family dwellings or in barns until school houses could be located and built.

During the year 1797 a circumstance occurred that proved to be the beginning of a long and exciting controversy over the question of a site for the meeting house, which it was expected would be used for all public meetings of the town of a secular or religious nature.

Previously to this, all town meetings, regular and special, all freeman's meetings for the election of state officers and otherwise, and the religious meetings, had been held at Gen. Wait's house or barn. At about that time a motion was carried in the regular or annual town meeting (where such questions were for a few years decided), to hold the Sunday meetings for the current year at the house of William Palmer, then living south of the land already purchased for a "Common." Whereupon the old yeoman of "Dana Hill," Francis Dana, expostulated with the voters. They at once rescinded their former action; then voted to hold the meetings as "nigh the Center of the town as possible," and then voted to hold the religious meetings for that year in Gen. Wait's barn!

It is susceptible of demonstration that this place did, at that time, actually represent very nearly the center of population, although at the extreme western boundary of the town. The travel of the town passed very near to it, or by it, in going to the mills before mentioned; there being an intersection of the roads near the house of his son Ezra, which stood on the knoll a little north







of the now Methodist parsonage. The road from Moretown to the mills and points south of them passed over the hill south of his son's house, and, at that house, intersected with the road crossing the river and leading in the direction of Roxbury. At this point of intersection the town had directed all public notifications to be posted.

We have said that school districts were formed about this time.

An old settler of the town, Jennison Jones, whose name was connected with much early history of the town and its preservation in manuscript, has left for us a census of all the voters in town for the year 1797, arranged by himself, as it appears, with reference to their location in school districts. The total number of names on the freeman's list was sixty-one and they were as follows:

## N. W. DISTRICT.

- 1 Stephen Pierce.
- 2 John Barnard.
- 3 Elias Wells.
- 4 James Heaton.
- 5 Dunn Still.
- 6 Daniel Wilder.
- 7 Levi Wilder.
- 8 Phineas Rider.
- 9 Jared Skinner.
- 10 David Symonds.
- 11 Elijah Freeman.
- 12 John Burdick.
- 13 Jonathan Seaver.
- 14 Joseph Barns.
- 15 Gaius Hitchcock.
- 16 Abram Marsh.
- 17 Samuel Barnard.
- 18 Moses Fisk.
- 19 Selah Smith.
- 20 Elijah Smith.

- 21 Daniel Taylor.
- 22 Beriah Sherman.
- 23 Abel Spaulding.

## S. W. DISTRICT.

- 1 Gen. Benjamin Wait.
- 2 Ezra Wait.
- 3 Benjamin Wait, Jr.  
[Gilbert Wait had a family at that time, but was yet a minor.]
- 4 Thomas Sherman.
- 5 Thomas Sherman, Jr.
- 6 Daniel Sherman.
- 7 Elijah Sperry.
- 8 Jeduthan Wait.  
[Half brother of Gen. Wait.]
- 9 Joseph Trask.
- 10 Isaac Trask.
- 11 Silas Trask.
- 12 Simeon Stoddard, (Dr.)
- 13 Nathan Sterling.
- 14 Jesse Mix.



- 15 Eli Abbott.
- 16 Jonah Strickland.
- 17 Francis Dana.
- 18 Henry Dana.
- 19 Foster Dana.

## N. E. DISTRICT.

- 1 Moses Chase.
- 2 Bissell Phelps, (soldier.)
- 3 David Phelps.
- 4 Eli Skinner.
- 5 Salma Rider.
- 6 Jonathan Palmer.
- 7 Samuel S. Savage.

- 8 Nathaniel Bartlett.
- 9 William Palmer.
- 10 William Joiner.
- 11 Harba Childs.
- 12 Joshua Pike.
- 13 William Wheeler.
- 14 Elijah Grandy.
- 15 Joseph Hamilton.

## S. E. DISTRICT.

- 1 Evan Clark.
- 2 Aaron Miner.
- 3 Ezekiel Hawley.
- 4 Samuel Bailey.

This shows a total of forty-two voters in what may be called the river districts, including four or five at most, living on the high ground and only nineteen in the other two.

## MEMORANDUM.

## Names of some who came a few years later.

Thomas Green.  
 Job House.  
 Amasa Skinner.  
 Ezra Jones.  
 Jennison Jones.  
 Matthias S. Jones.  
 Doud Bushnell.  
 [A Revolutionary soldier.]  
 Jonathan Wallis.  
 Joseph Wallis.  
 Negro Sam.  
 Joseph Joslin, Sr.  
 Joseph Joslin, Jr.  
 William Chase.  
 Moses Smith.  
 James Joslin.  
 Nathaniel Joslin.  
 Dr. Frederick Richardson.  
 Roderick Richardson.  
 Capt. Ira Richardson.  
 Roswell Richardson.

John Campbell.  
 Josiah Campbell.  
 Elias Taylor.  
 William Salisbury.  
 Edmund Rice.  
 Ralph Turner.  
 Dr. William Joslin.  
 Hooker Joslin.  
 Cyrus Joslin.  
 Jason Carpenter.  
 John S. Poland.  
 Isaac Tewksbury.  
 Amasa Russ.  
 Garinter Hastings.  
 Amariah Chandler.  
 Roswell Horr.  
 Simeon Pratt, (and others.)  
 William Wait.  
 [A Revolutionary soldier and half brother of Gen. Wait. One arm gone.]



## STATISTICS.

In 1802 a return of scholars between the ages of four years and eighteen years in the several school districts gave the following results:

N. W. District (North),	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	62
S. W.       “	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	57
S. E.       “	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	29
N. E.       “	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	57

The number much increased in later years.

In this situation respecting the location of the families and their needs of school houses and a place to hold secular and religious meetings for all the town, it was in 1798 voted by the town to build a town house near the east side of the Common, 36 ft. x 18 ft., with walls nine feet high; to be built in conjunction with the northeast school district if they should agree thereto. It was reported that the district would concur, and the contracts for putting up the frame, and enclosing it, were at once awarded. This action proved to be a little premature, for, although the contractor put up the frame, the school district was finally excused from entering the partnership and the work was suspended.

All further attempts to finish that structure failed, as the sentiment of the majority of the town reacted and stood adverse to any project for completing it. Two or three years afterwards the frame was taken down, moved to a spot a little north of Gen. Wait's house, finished up and used, for several years, for the purposes of a store, around which there very soon grew up other branches of industry, including a manufactory of potash salts and ultimately a tannery and blacksmith shop, also a little later a public house near where Mr. David O. Joslyn's family now reside.





Possibly this may have been in part a business movement towards centering the commercial interests of the town near the river, at the expense of site on the Common.

From 1798 till 1804 all town meetings were held at the dwelling house of Ezra Wait at the intersection of roads leading from the General's house respectively towards the Bridge and towards Green's Mills.

A little incident occurred at one of the annual meetings held at this place which may be of especial interest to the ladies. The town had never been accustomed to pay anything for the privileges of meeting at these private dwellings, but in 1802 the citizens voted "to pay Mrs. Wait, the wife of Mr. Ezra Wait, six dollars for the trouble caused by holding town meetings in their house." What that lady had said about having snow and mud tracked over the floor of that spacious and pleasant south kitchen by that crowd of men gathering three or four times a year can never be known. We are glad to know, however, in this generation, that those men of Waitsfield had sufficient respect for woman's rights to pay that money to Mrs. Wait.

In 1804 the town voted to hold its town meetings at a house near the Common. Since the former fruitless attempt to build a town house on the Common there had not been a long season of passiveness in respect to where the public buildings and business centre should be. The situation was now changed and changing. Families had come in and occupied nearly every available or tillable tract on this west side of the mountain, and the two parties upon this question had become very evenly balanced. A share of the inhabitants on



the river farms would be, as the roads then were, nearly or quite as well inconvenienced at the Common as elsewhere.

In that year, 1804, there came a crisis which practically settled the matter against the deliberate judgment of Gen. Wait.

At this time it was clearly apparent that the territory belonging to Waitsfield on the east of the mountain could never have an important place in the municipal, educational and religious affairs of Waitsfield. Many years prior to its being set to Northfield, it was conceded that it must go, or become a little township by itself.

On the other hand it was just as clear, we think, to Gen. Wait, and those in sympathy with him, that Fayston (of which Lynde Wait, his son-in-law, was the first settler, others having joined him on land near the eastern and central part of the town) must, from its natural conformation of surface, be in commercial matters at least in close alliance with Waitsfield; and so he planned the last great effort of his life to make his favorite spot the center of a town.

He had tried two years before, to encourage the building of a house of worship by subscribing for pews (or pew ground) to an amount exceeding \$600, at a time when it appeared that a sufficient amount could be raised without resorting to the offensive method of taxation, but the undertaking failed. The subject of location always divided the house, and was a continuous cause of disagreement.

The people of Fayston were then agitating the subject of organizing a town.

Therefore a meeting of the citizens of Waitsfield was



called, "to see if town would join with the proprietors of Fayston in petitioning the General Assembly, next to be holden at Windsor, to have Fayston annexed to Waitsfield, and to enjoy the same privileges as though they were separate."

This meeting was held in the winter, at a private house, small in size, situated near the Common. There were no less than eighty voters present that day, that number representing the number of votes actually cast for and against the proposition. There is no record of more than sixty-one voters ever having assembled at any former meeting of the town.

They carried the motion in favor of annexation by a vote of forty-one for and thirty-nine against the proposition.

That continued to be a subject of exciting controversy throughout the year, and long afterwards, and naturally enough, under such a condition of things, when the matter was carried to the legislature the petitioners were defeated.

That was a grievous disappointment to Gen. Wait, and when, about two years later, the preliminaries of a final and successful movement to build the large, and for those days elegant house of worship, on the Common were begun, made keenly sensitive by former defeat, he withdrew from the ecclesiastical society, of which he was a member, and had no participation in its work.

Frailty of human nature, concurrent with the deepest interest in the town of his solicitude; concurrent with the exercise of a sound judgment upon which he had learned to rely—as others had so often relied; concurrent with the force of a strong will, which had carried him so often to the front, but now for a little time, reversed his position!







It need not be said that the fathers differing from him made any mistake in thus shaping the early affairs of the town. But it may be remembered that the good judgment—possibly the foresight of this oldest father of the town, was, less than twenty-five years afterwards, approved by the most sagacious business men of that time by removing their business from the Common and planting enterprises on the very land he had formerly owned, and where the village has since received its growth.

What more of Benjamin Wait?

He did not cherish resentment long. There was tenderness and forgiveness in his nature—as in the strongest characters. In a little while he was the trusted counsellor and promoter of the religious society to which we have referred, and a little later in full and kindly Christian fellowship with the members of the church, continuing so to the last. His interest in the public questions and in the general concerns of the town continued as he advanced to a very great age, and he served the people in numerous ways.

As early as was practicable he divided a portion of his large tract of land among his older sons, and to a half brother, Jeduthan Wait, who occupied the section just southwest of the village.

The farm first occupied by the oldest son, Ezra Wait, consisted of ninety acres lying between the farms of his father on the north and his uncle on the south, and including the tract upon which the most central portions of our village now stand. This son was the first constable and collector for the town, holding that office for several years. Both he and his wife died during an epidemic of fever about the year 1809, leaving a large



family of children, several of whom found homes with their grandfather for several years. Benjamin, Jr., occupied the farm next north of his father's farm, but removed to Chazy, N. Y., we think, considerably before 1810. He was town clerk for several years, and frequently held other offices. After the death of Ezra and the removal of Benjamin, Jr., the next younger brothers, Gilbert and Thomas, appear to have taken their places. Soon after, Thomas died, and four years later (in 1812) his wife, Lovina Phelps, daughter of the old settler, Bissell Phelps, also died, leaving a family of four children. Gilbert appears to have removed, after the death of Thomas, to the farm first owned by his brother, Benjamin, Jr. Joseph probably lived with the General until 1819, when the old homestead of 200 acres passed into the hands of the son-in-law, Lynde Wait; and Joseph and Gilbert evidently left the town. The youngest son is reported to have gone to sea at some early date and was not afterwards heard from. The family of the other daughter, Mrs. Phelps, lingered in the town until about 1819 or 1820 and then joined the moving crowd in search of other homes. Lynde Wait and his family moved to Northern New York more than fifty years ago. For more than forty years the late Mrs. Harriet Wait Carpenter (daughter of Gilbert Wait, granddaughter of Benjamin Wait) and her children and grandchildren remained the sole representatives of the family of Gen. Wait, resident in our town. Now none remain, yet, with this example of change in view, it is probably correct to say that members of no less than one-third of the families now resident here can trace their lineage to people who settled here before the year 1800. There are countless reminiscences that



it would be appropriate to tell on this centennial occasion. There are hundreds of family histories it would be interesting to follow. It would be pleasant and instructive to review the great and vital issues that have been met in the last century, in which our ancestors and those now living have participated in deciding. This must be left for others to do.

A little more concerning the subject of our sketch and we are done.

The mother of his children, as has been said, died in 1804. Subsequently he married again, but the speaker knows very little of the antecedents of Mrs. Mehitable Wait, or her life after the decease of her husband.

In 1816 the General, then eighty years old, made careful provision for surrendering worldly cares, by deeding to one and another of his children, or others in interest, such real estate as had not otherwise been disposed of.

He lived, however, to the age of eighty-six years and four months. On the morning of June 28, 1822, "feeling in better than usual health and spirits," he started out, as the story is told, with an attendant, announcing his intention of going to the Common on some matter of business and of returning by way of the lower bridge, wishing also to call at the house of John Burdick—adding the remark, "after that he should be ready to go when called for." He accomplished the journey so far as to reach the house of Mr. Burdick, the old-time lawyer of the town, who lived on the river road about a mile and a half distant and northeast of the General's home.

Soon after his arrival he complained of illness, and before his family could be summoned he had passed away.







The funeral service was held two days later and is remembered by a few who are here to-day. Exercises were conducted in accordance with the ritual of the Masonic order, to which he had belonged.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS.

While Vermont was seeking of a reluctant congress admission as a state—more than a hundred years ago—a leading citizen, a man of remarkable insight into the character of its early settlers, in an address to that body, paid the following tribute to his fellow citizens and partners in the struggles of that time. He said:

“Though it is not common that men of so great learning as some in the world should go to subdue the wilderness, yet I think we have men of as much virtue and as good talents as any in the world.”

Responding to that sentiment to-day, standing as we do stand upon the foreground of another century of our little town's existence, reviewing the character of the peopling it has had—may we be ready to exclaim with reverence and with fervor: *So let it be!*

WALTER A. JONES.

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